

After the Spill: A Study of Vernacular Landscape in West Virginia's Chemical Valley

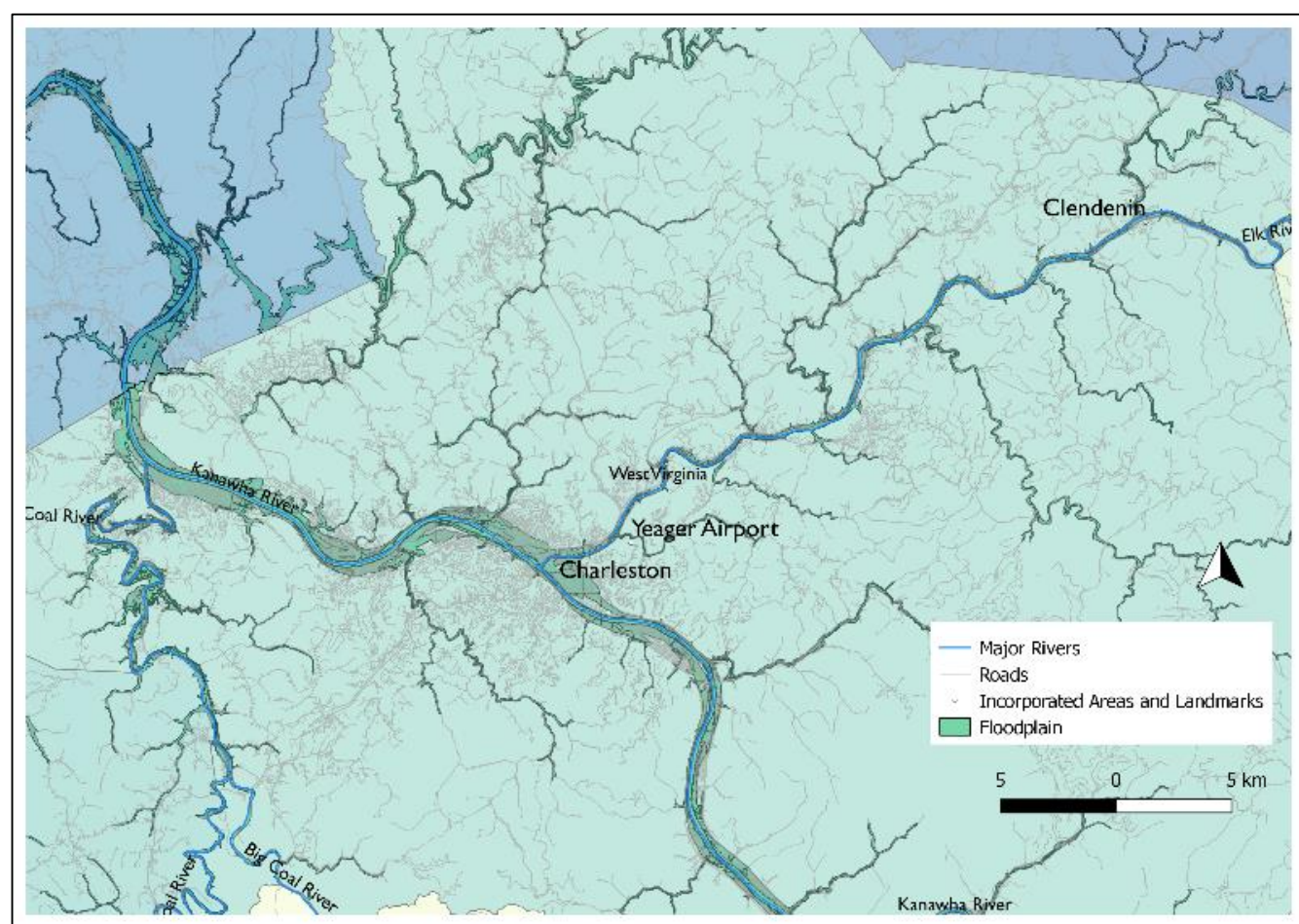


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INTRODUCTION

In 2014, a large scale chemical spill occurred in Charleston, WV that affected the drinking water of residents in nine counties (about 300,000 people). The chemical was a coal cleaning chemical called 4-methylcyclohexanemethanol that was stored along the Elk river in Charleston, just below the Yeager Airport.

Several counties in WV were declared a Federal state of emergency, and the National Guard was sent in to deliver potable water. Local groups organized to deliver water to people unable to get to the city centers. Even though the “do not drink” ban was lifted shortly after the spill occurred, many people did not drink their water long after the spill and some still rely on bottled water now. Originally, this project was designed to research the long-term effects and implications of the 2014 spill for residents of WV, and to find out what was happening now in response to the spill.



Right: Map of counties affected by 2016 Floods and 2014 Chemical Spill
Above: map of Kanawha county showing some sites visited (Clendenin, Yeager Airport, Charleston) in relation to major rivers. Roads and map of floodplain included to give a sense of the topography.

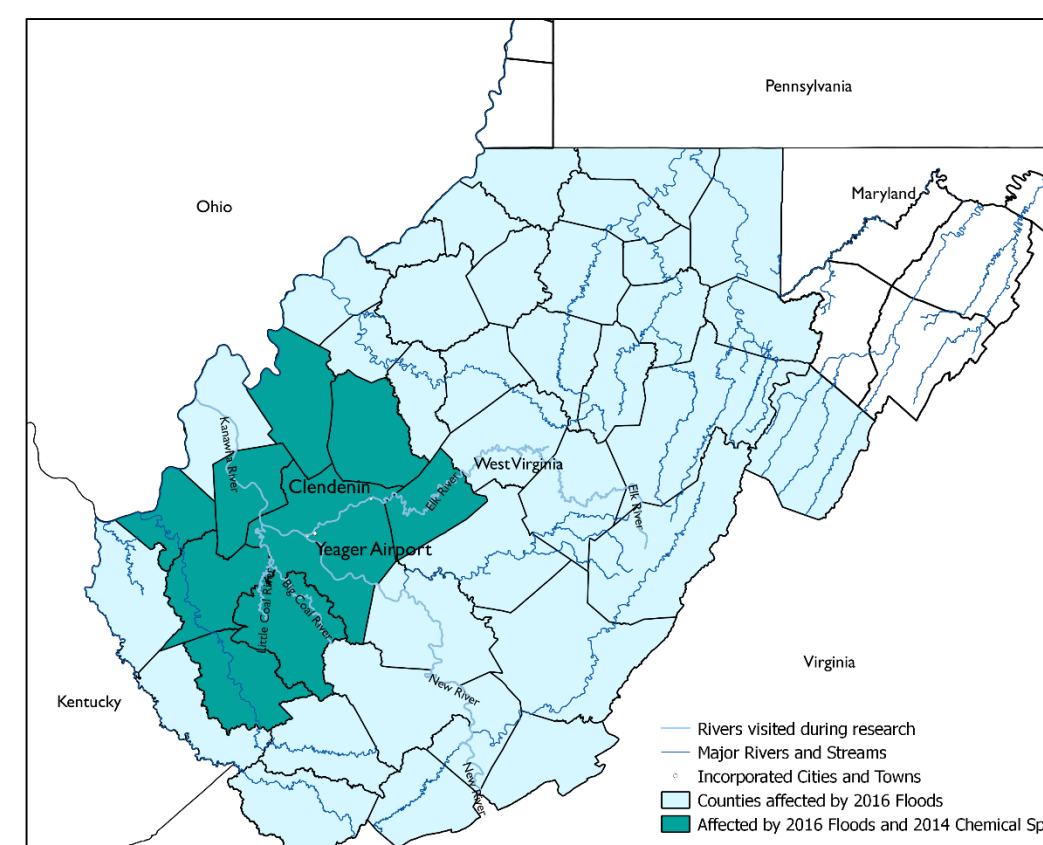


View of airport landslide from Keystone dr. Sign says, “Ground Zero, Still Here, 16 Months”

DEVELOPMENTS & CHANGES

2016 Flood and Other Disasters

- Late June of 2016 many counties in WV were affected by a devastating flood – northern Kanawha (Clendenin) and Greenbrier counties were hit especially hard
- 2015 Yeager Airport landslide that covered Keystone Dr and backed up the creek causing flooding
- Prevalence of other environmental disasters in WV in recent and distant history related to the coal and chemical industries – spills, explosions, contaminations, etc.
- In practice, I found it less productive to focus on one particular disaster in the context of many overlapping and pressing disasters in people's lives



PROCESS AND METHOD

- This research is primarily based in ethnography and ethnographic methods; this method places importance on context & performance, and relies on close listening
- I used interviews and participant observation to gather information -- I interviewed people working in water-related industries, grassroots organizers, and flood victims in Kanawha county WV
- Interviews and field notes become “texts” to be studied
- Interviews are comprised of open-ended
- questions that are not standard across interviews, and are a mix of pre-conceived questions and questions formed based on the flow of conversation
- Ethnography based methods allow for the collection of data around complex questions – for example, how social contexts & power dynamics effect the causes and consequences of environmental disasters – collection of quantitative or statistical data often do not reveal social and cultural contexts & implications



Images from disaster relief center and home in Clendenin WV



Flooded home garden along the Elk River in Clendenin, WV

REFLECTIONS & DISCOVERIES

- Particularly in this region, and WV more generally, environmental and industrial disasters are reoccurring and ongoing – they are not quickly remediated and have a clear “end” – in this sense, it can be difficult to study particular disasters on their own, and it may be more productive to think about them as patterns or groups
- The interconnection of disasters, local history, and personal experience in narrative – victims of natural/environmental disasters discuss their experiences in relation to other disasters, local history, and personal experiences
- Narratives that complicate the discourse of individual blame that can follow environmental and industrial disasters

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Maps and photos by Bethani Turley